

CHAPTER 2: ENCOURAGING YOUR CHILD

'No! Don't touch that! Mummy says no! Did you hear me? I said no! Now put that back! And don't think I'm not watching you! How many times do I have to tell you to stop making a mess!... I said stop it! Just stop it! Do it again and you'll get a smack where it hurts. Now I've warned you! You're becoming very, very spoilt, and you're not going to get away with it any more! Do you hear!!...'

The effects of nagging and scolding

Do you know how many times, on average, a parent nags or scolds a pre-school child every day? Fifty five times, according to a recent study. There are all kinds of reasons why this happens, including the fact that the child who most needs love often makes herself the most difficult to love. But can you imagine the effect on children of this constant nagging, reminding, scolding, shouting, and fault finding, often delivered in an impatient, angry, disrespectful tone of voice? You will tend to come across as a negative rather than a positive person in the eyes of your child, and you will tend to breed resentment, anger and constant power-struggles. Many two-year-olds' favourite word is 'no,' perhaps because they have heard 'no' more than any other word.

In chapter one, we saw how ineffective this constant attention to misbehaviour is. Negative attention is not only ineffective, however; but it also does damage. When parents have to shout and smack *more* to get the same effect, it can more easily happen that they drift into causing physical or emotional abuse. **Constant criticism also undermines children's confidence. They develop guilt, shame and low self-esteem. They often end up believing the negative things that are said in anger by someone they love** – that they are bad, cheeky, stupid, naughty, disgusting, or worse. Many adults still go around today believing and being affected by wrong messages like these, which they picked up when they were small.



they've heard 'no' more than any other word

"I'll misbehave less if you notice me..."

What may be just as serious as paying attention to misbehaviour is the *lack* of attention we pay to what is *positive and good* in our children. We notice children when they are squabbling, but we can easily ignore them when they are playing quietly. We sometimes make a bigger fuss when they wet their pants than when they make steady progress in potty training. Some parents only sing to children who are crying or who will not sleep. Some only play with a child when they feel they have no choice.

Positive attention often stops when children come into their second or third year. They may then begin to misbehave in an attempt to be noticed, since they are not noticed otherwise! If they had words to express themselves, they might say something like:

"Mummy..., Dad..., you were so lovely to me in the first year of my life. I knew you loved me and I felt great security, because you looked after all my needs with such attention. I felt precious and secure.

What has happened? I miss your smiles and cuddles and all the lovely things you used to say to me. Why don't you notice me much now? Aren't you pleased to see me develop and grow and make my own decisions? Have I done something wrong? Am I bad? Don't you love me any more?

When I couldn't talk, you used to listen

with big round eyes. When I couldn't walk, you paid such good attention and encouraged every little step. Now you don't seem very interested. I know I misbehave a lot now, but it seems to be the only way I get your attention these days; I don't like it when you scold me and when you're impatient with me, but I'd rather have that attention than nothing.

Things would be different if you gave me attention when I'm good. I'm happy to play on my own, and talk to myself, and sing, but I need you to notice me sometimes when I'm good. Please, Mummy. Please, Dad. I miss you. I'd love you to pay attention to me when I'm not misbehaving. I'll misbehave much less if you do. I need the positive attention you used to give me – the affection, and the cuddling, and the delight when you looked at me. I need to know you love me and that I'm still loveable. Am I?...



please notice me sometimes when I'm good

Giving positive attention

One of the goals of this book is to show the effects on children of giving them **positive, respectful attention, even for a few minutes at a time, when they are not demanding it.** That is the theme of almost all the chapters. It applies to the ways we listen to children, talk with them, touch them and play with them. Research shows that even the most 'difficult' children can respond to this approach; they find they no

longer need to misbehave because their parents are at last giving them the positive attention they had so desperately been seeking. Noticing children positively when they are *not* looking for attention helps to convince them that they are loveable and helps them grow in self-esteem and the ability to meet challenges *throughout* life.

What does it mean to 'pay positive attention?' Positive attention means communicating your love in the way you hold and carry and touch and stroke and cuddle your children, and in the way you talk with them, smile at them and listen to them. (According to one study, baby girls get five times as much cuddling and touch as boys!) Children pick up a great many messages about who they are and how welcome and loved they are, even in the first year of life. When you say things like "I'm glad you're a girl," "I'm glad you're a boy," or "I love you, and you are completely safe with me," the child may not know the meaning of the words but will still pick up the positive vibes from you – just as a baby picks up the negative vibes when described as 'spoilt' or 'demanding.'

In the first year of life, children's most basic task is to develop a sense of security and trust. This is done partly by meeting their needs, but also through all the positive communication and human closeness, the touching, the talking, the singing, that goes along with meeting their needs. When you take a few minutes to hold and comfort your crying daughter, you give her security and let her know she is loved.

Is it 'praise' or is it encouragement?

As children get older, one obvious way to give them positive attention is to notice any little contributions, efforts, or improvements they make. We can easily miss these because our society tends to emphasise success and achievement; people get prizes for coming first, not for making an effort or for improving. Try lowering your sights and forgetting about success or perfection. Even though your son cannot tie his laces, congratulate him on being able to make the *first* tying, "That's pretty good.

Well done.” – or on making an unsuccessful attempt, “Good boy. That was really difficult, but you kept trying.” Ignore the mess on the floor that has not been tidied and notice the *effort* your daughter makes to ‘tidy’ something – “Oh, I see you tidied away your *big* teddy. That helps me, thank you.” Similarly, instead of noticing when your son leaves his coat on the floor (thus reinforcing the untidiness by giving attention to it), notice the one time when he hangs it up – and see how often he then begins to hang it up!

Note that parents do not go overboard with exaggerated or insincere praise in the situations above – “Oh, you’re a wonderful boy! I don’t know what I’d do without you!” Children know when you are being insincere and will often feel uncomfortable rather than encouraged by exaggeration. A child will often feel more encouraged by quite a low-key remark that just *notices* an effort or contribution. “Andrew’s asleep because you sang to him. That’s nice.” “I was pleased to see you sharing your toys – was that hard?” Even a simple “thank-you” is often enough – “Oh, thanks for putting Teddy back.”

‘Praising’ rather than encouraging a child also tends to make it harder for the child to live up to an adult’s opinion – “You’re a very generous girl” is much harder to live up to than “Mm, he was pleased you gave him that.” Similarly, a remark like “That’s a lovely drawing” gives *my* opinion and may not encourage children to form their own opinions, whereas an observation like “Mm, you’ve a lot of yellow in it – that makes it look brighter,” or “You’ve worked hard at that,” even “You’ve done that all by yourself,” can help them to make up their own minds and develop their own creativity.

You notice in the statements above that **encouraging parents tend to speak personally, saying how they feel** – “I like...” “I was pleased to see...” “That helps me.” “I’m happy about the way you’ve...” Can you see how “I like your picture” is better than a general statement like “That’s a beautiful picture!” in helping a

child develop a sense of it being okay for different people to have different tastes?

Do you give your child responsibilities?

Now, we have seen that children need to experience limits, correction and some guidance for responsibility. Being a positive parent does not mean being a dear old Dreamy Dad or Doormat Mum who makes no demands. Children need to develop a sense of being able to do things well and make good decisions. Our goal as parents, then, is to help them grow gradually in responsibility so that they become responsible, caring, co-operative adults, able to contribute to society in their unique ways. How do we do this?

“**Do not do for children what they can do for themselves,**” is what the psychologist Rudolf Dreikurs taught, for he had observed that children become more responsible when they are *given* responsibility. What effect will it have if you sort out squabbles, build lego houses, etc., instead of *helping* children to do these things for themselves? It will take more time initially, but you are developing your child’s self-confidence and sense of responsibility when you take the time to ask questions and help her work out her own solutions: “I don’t know... What do you think yourself?... How do you feel about that?...”

In the planning section at the end of this chapter, you will see many areas where



through all the positive communication

parents can let go and encourage their children to develop. This is usually done in three stages:

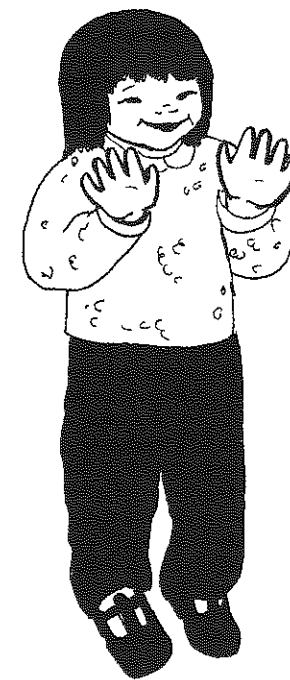
1. You do *most* of the work, helping your child to use a spoon, or to dress, or to ride a tricycle...
2. You do less and less, encouraging the child to do more each time by noticing the effort and improvement. Instead of picking up a ball and bringing it over, allow and encourage your baby to crawl over to get it. It is encouraging for children to learn by *doing* things that there are more and more things they are capable of.
3. You fade into the background – but you turn up occasionally to notice the improvement. “Look – she’s feeding herself!” “Mm, you remembered to wash your hands. Well done!” If your encouragement is genuine, a child cannot ever get too much of it.

Time for guidance

Why is it that it is sometimes so difficult to get children to take on responsibilities? Sometimes, it may be because we push before they show readiness or interest. Each child is different, but if other children are potty-trained at his age, we may think he *ought* to be ready. We have to be patient! If Neil will go nowhere without his blanket or his Teddy, or if Anna still sucks her thumb at five, perhaps we need to respect their need for a security object until they are ready to let it go – that is part of their growth in security.

Or perhaps they are ready to take on responsibilities, but our *timing* is wrong. Probably the worst time for instruction or guidance is when we are under pressure or tired, or when a child has just made a mistake. Yet those are precisely the times when parents most *discourage* children by nagging, shouting, correcting or ‘teaching.’ We become critics then instead of guides.

That seems to point to **the importance of setting aside quieter, more relaxed times for helping a child to learn – and perhaps not even attempting guidance at other times.** Some parents link certain specific times with developing this



You remembered to wash them. Well done.

responsibility – like a weekly trip to a supermarket. That can slow you down and help you remember that the child is more important than the shopping. Somehow it seems not to matter then if the shopping takes an extra fifteen minutes – the shopping trip can become a thoroughly enjoyable outing as you point to the sugar, say “Get me the sugar, please.” and wait for it to be delivered. Even if your son drops the sugar on the floor, it’s no big deal – and both you and he go home in such good spirits that you may even enjoy giving him further responsibilities when it comes to stacking away the groceries.

An occasional encouraging remark will add to your child’s experience: “ “Thanks for doing that.” “I like you helping me.” But it is the *experience* of helping you and of doing things for themselves that is probably better for building children’s self-confidence than anything you *say*. Also the experience of your smile, your trust in her ability, your obvious enjoyment of his company, the occasional touch that says “I notice you and I like being with you” – these carry the more important messages in building your child’s self-esteem.

When parents begin to allow children to take on new responsibilities, however, it

sometimes happens that they overlook the effect of all this on a younger child. It is easy to keep the youngest child in a 'baby' role within a family so that even *less* is expected of her. Some psychologists suggest that it may be better not to continue to refer to that child as 'the baby,' but by name, and that you might give her some responsibilities at the same time as another child – like helping you 'wash' a door. In this way, she avoids the danger of becoming stuck in a role and she also has a positive, encouraging experience.

Encouragement is a way of life

Encouragement has to be genuine to be effective. One little boy, asked by his father to "come back and close the door, love," asked "Why do you only call me 'love' when you say not-nice things?" His father was shocked to realise that his irritation had been coming through in this way. Children are quick to pick up little clues – like the difference between *what* you say and *how* you say it. They are not fooled.

Genuine encouragement, then, is not just a matter of using *techniques* or trying to manipulate children to do what you want them to do. It is more a question of paying attention to the *child* than to his *behaviour*. **Learning techniques or skills may help you to become more encouraging, but encouragement is a mentality, a way of looking at children that respects them and wants them to develop in their own unique way.** It is a mentality that thinks about a child when she is not around, asking, "What is the next step that is going to stretch her and build her confidence, and how can I deal with my own irritations to be able to get enough distance to help her?" That can begin to colour your approach to *everyone* you meet.

But I'm just not a warm person!

This may seem like a tall order. What if you are just not a warm person? What if you do not even like *yourself* very much, or the kind of person you are? What if you are naturally a bit distant and critical – or if



Even if your son drops the sugar...

a child is driving you up the wall? It's usually a great relief to have a place where you can talk about how mad or guilty or bad you feel – perhaps in a parent support group. But it may help to know that being an encouraging person is also something you can grow into. It means slowing down, being more relaxed, making *time* for a child – and for your partner and others. You say 'no' to the unreasonable demands of your job, you let go of the fascination with keeping your home and children looking perfect, you resist the pressure to be always active and doing – or whatever else it is that absorbs your time.

That will take time and planning. As you learn to slow down and practise the skills in this book, however, the experience will gradually begin to affect you and you can *become* a warmer person. Then, this course ceases to be just about parenting and becomes something deeply fulfilling for yourself as a person. One of the great pieces of wisdom that has come from the East is that the secret of happiness is to be grateful, to be appreciative. Try it and see. The first step may be your decision to slow down and make the time to pay positive attention to your children when they are not expecting it.

Importance of *your* self-esteem

Doesn't this also point to the importance of encouraging *yourself*? You can be more positive in how you think about your children when you are positive in how you think about yourself. Try interrupting negative thoughts about yourself as soon as you become aware of them, and *remind* yourself that you're doing okay, and it is all right not to be perfect.

Similarly, **don't you need to be good to yourself if you want to be good to your child?** If you're not relaxed, your child will pick up the vibes. In chapter one we saw how important it is to get exercise, rest and fresh air. You need to *find* ways of getting these – even for your child's sake. It also helps to *speak* these values: if you say, "I went for a swim and I'm feeling great now," that may teach an important lesson.

Part of looking after yourself, too, is looking after your relationships – with a partner, with friends, or with your extended family. It is hard to go it alone. You need support. If you are a couple, everyone will suffer if your partner is squeezed out. When you make time for going out together, and for fun and teasing and laughter, you may both begin to feel better about yourselves. If possible, develop and encourage the bond, not just between mother and child but also between father (or a father figure) and child – and between you and your partner.

Summing up

This chapter is about the power parents have to encourage their children and help them grow in their ability to meet life's challenges. To sum up, **children develop and grow best, and they benefit in all kinds of ways, when their parents stop paying so much attention to misbehaviour and give them positive attention that they are not expecting.** This is not just a matter of encouraging *words*. It includes time for listening, singing, touching, cuddling, smiling, playing, laughing... The effect, even on a disruptive child, is magic. The idea is to stop looking for perfection and to

concentrate on **little improvements or efforts instead of successes or achievements.**

This encouragement needs to be sincere, for children quickly sense when it is exaggerated or false. They also develop and grow in confidence when they are allowed to make decisions and are trusted with increasing responsibility instead of being sheltered or overprotected or expected to obey adults on demand.

Finally, there can be an important spin-off effect on *yourself* when you take a more encouraging approach. This is particularly true when you take time to relax and look after yourself, and when you interrupt and challenge negative thoughts about yourself.

In the remaining chapters of this book, you will find many other ways of encouraging children – even in the chapter on discipline (when you pick up and remove a kicking, screaming child from a supermarket, it may not *feel* like the most encouraging thing in the world, but it can be very positive and encouraging for that child to experience the security of firm limits!) In the next chapter, we will be looking at one of the most encouraging of all parenting skills – listening.



"I went for a swim and I'm feeling great now"

TABLE 2: ENCOURAGING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Tick two ways in which you tend to discourage (columns 1 & 2), and two ways in which you tend to be reasonably good at encouraging (columns 3 & 4).

| HOW PARENTS DISCOURAGE | TYPICAL BEHAVIOUR OR REMARKS | HOW PARENTS ENCOURAGE | TYPICAL BEHAVIOUR OR REMARKS |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Tries to 'stretch' child too quickly | Teaching to crawl, potty training, etc., too early. Or toys too advanced. | 1. Respects child's own pace. Waits for readiness and interest. | Potty-training, walking, suitable toys, only when ready/ interested. |
| 2. Exaggerated praise – based on your standards. | <i>What a beautiful painting – you're a wonderful boy!</i> | 2. Happy with efforts rather than perfection. | (smiling) <i>You tried really hard. Good for you!</i> |
| 3. Does too much for child. | <i>No, sit down – I'll put on your shoes.</i> | 3. Allows child to experiment and make mistakes. | <i>You put on the shoe and we'll buckle it together.</i> |
| 4. Forces child into new situations. | <i>Don't be silly – the dog won't bite you! Here! Pat his back</i> | 4. Doesn't push. Respects child's fears. | (lifting child) <i>Bye, doggie! See you tomorrow.</i> |
| 5. Over-protective. | <i>Ah-ah!... Dirty! Don't touch the ground!</i> | 5. Allows child to explore – and to play creatively. | <i>Would you like to splash the water and see?...</i> |
| 6. Expects child to 'grow up' too quickly. | Removes favourite blanket/ teddy, or weans off bottle before ready. | 6. Reasonably accepting and relaxed at each stage. | Weans off bottle or blanket when child shows interest in next stage. |
| 7. Compares to others | <i>Look how well he does it. When are you going to...?</i> | 7. Happy with small improvements. | <i>Mm... You're much better at using the spoon now...</i> |
| 8. Bosses, shouts, gives orders, controls. | <i>You're not trying! Eat it up fast and stop talking! Fast!</i> | 8. Allows child to live with consequences – within reason. | <i>Not yet. You can have toast when you finish your cereal.</i> |
| 9. Too busy to give child relaxed time/ attention. | <i>Would you stop whinging! I can't do everything!</i> | 9. Spends time when child does not expect it – cuddles, listening, stories | <i>What would you like to play? Or: I'm rushed now but we'll have special time at seven o'clock.</i> |

CASE STUDIES



What might you do or say to encourage your child in some of the following situations? (Remember that it is also encouraging for children to experience some

limits on their behaviour – though they may react and cry at the time.)

- Your baby has been frightened by a loud noise.
- You would like to help Delia learn to tidy up her toys after play.
- Jordan is learning to put on his shoes.

- You've been shopping, and two-year-old Katey wants to help you tidy away the groceries.
- Clare keeps opening cupboards in the kitchen and pulling everything out of them.
- You'd like to teach David to ride his tricycle.
- Duncan loves his bath and cries every time he's taken out of it.
- Julie refuses to eat mashed potatoes, but asks for "ice-queem."
- Richard puts his hands into his cereal and likes to play with it.

PLANNING



It is important not to 'push' children to learn to do things before they show some readiness or interest. Here are some things parents do for their children up to six or seven years old which their children, according to age, might learn to do for themselves. Put the first letter of your child's name beside anything which that child might now be ready to learn to do:

Crawl or walk instead of being carried.
Pick toys, etc., off floor.
Tidy away some groceries.
Wipe nose with tissue or cloth.
Take off some clothes.
Choose what to wear
Put on some clothes
Reach for some things.
Play with water.
Lay the table
Ride a tricycle – or bike with stabilisers.

Ride a bicycle – without stabilisers.
Put soiled clothes in clothes basket.
Wash face and hands
Paint, use crayons, draw.
Help with shopping in supermarket.
Settle own fights and squabbles.
Use a spoon, or knife, or fork.
Use scissors.
Hold own cup or bottle for drinking.
Eat with less supervision.
Put on shoes – and buckle/tie them.

*Choose one idea from the list above that you will introduce in the coming week. With which child are you going to try it? Making a **decision** to slow down and take time usually helps a parent to be more patient and positive, so when will **you** be able to relax and let go? What might be a positive approach? Remember to notice little improvements, or even efforts, "Thanks for doing that – it helps me." (And do remember to notice and encourage the **adults** in your life too!)*

My plans _____

• Please read chapter three of your handbook before the next session.